



The “Dreary World” of Christian Arabs

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ABSTRACT

Charles Issawi’s 1945 memorandum on the “problem of Christian Arabs” distilled their anxieties as liberal nationalism ebbed and Islamic nationalism gained strength. Issawi argued that, absent a Reformation-like rupture, Arab societies were structurally disposed to authoritarian rule – what he termed “Islamic Fascism.” The memorandum, presented in this essay, offers a bleak forecast for the future of minorities in the postwar Middle East. A brief sketch of Issawi’s education and career precedes the text.

KEYWORDS

Charles Issawi; Christians; minorities; Islamism; Arab nationalism; Arabs; Muslim Brotherhood; Lebanon; Egypt; Syria; Charles Malik

In November 1945, a 29-year-old adjunct professor in Beirut penned a stark appraisal of Near Eastern Christians under the title “The Problem of Christian Arabs with Special Reference to Those of Syria and Lebanon.” The author, Charles Issawi – later the distinguished economic historian at Columbia and Princeton – was little known at the time.¹

Issawi was born in Cairo in 1916 to Syrian (Greek Orthodox) parents. He recalled that at the time, “nobody made a distinction between Lebanese, Palestinian, Jordanian, and Syrian. We were all ‘Shawam’ [from *Ash-Sham*, ‘greater Syria’]; my family was ‘Christian Shawam’ . . . if you want a blood test, I am much more Damascene than anything else. Culturally I am Lebanese and Egyptian.”² Issawi grew up speaking French and Arabic, and began what he called a “long love affair with the English language” after attending a kindergarten run by two Englishwomen.³

Issawi spent his early years in Heliopolis, and then accompanied his father – Elie Bey Issawi, a senior civil servant – to Khartoum in the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan. He returned to Egypt for six formative years at Victoria College, Alexandria (1927–33). In 1934 he went up to Magdalen College, Oxford, on a Modern History scholarship, only to pivot to Philosophy, Politics and Economics, with the weight on economics. There he forged a lifelong friendship with his classmate Albert Hourani, and took his degree in 1937.

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¹The memorandum survives in the papers of his friend Charles Malik. Charles Habib Malik Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, box 24, folder 6. It is published here by the permission of Issawi’s heirs and Princeton University.

²Issawi interview in Nancy Elizabeth Gallagher, *Approaches to the History of the Middle East: Interviews with Leading Middle East Historians* (Reading, UK: Ithaca Press, an imprint of Garnet Publishing Limited, 1994), 47.

³Charles Issawi, *Growing Up Different: Memoirs of a Middle East Scholar* (Princeton, NJ: Darwin Press, 1999), 7.

Back in Cairo, Issawi served briefly at the Ministry of Finance (1937–38). He then joined the private, British-run National Bank of Egypt, where he headed statistical research (1938–43). The fit was never natural. “It’s a very dreary job,” he confessed to his former headmaster in 1938, “thinking of cheques and drafts and inflations and reserves; it’s inhuman. There’s only one job fit for a man: University or (second best) school teacher.”⁴ Prodded by Hourani, he completed in 1943 the manuscript that became his first book, *Egypt: An Economic and Social Analysis* (published in 1947, delayed by the war). He would later call it “an angry and intemperate work,” the product of his early socialism.⁵

In the summer of 1943, Issawi decamped to Beirut and joined the American University of Beirut (AUB), where he taught comparative government, political theory, and economics. “In Lebanon,” he later recalled, “I felt at home in a way that I had not felt before. I had never felt alienated in Egypt, but I now realized that Lebanon was where I belonged. In Oxford, I had always been a foreigner, but in Lebanon I felt at home. I had a marvelous group of colleagues, and it was the best moment to be in Lebanon. It was the beginning of the glorious years.”⁶

“Islamic Fascism”

In that setting – newly settled, professionally anchored, and watching a region still convulsed by aftershocks of the war – he drafted his memorandum on the “problem of Christian Arabs.” Readers who knew the later Issawi may find the text disconcerting: its judgments on Islam are severe; its forecast for Near Eastern Christians, bleak. Its candor perhaps arises from the fact that it was written not for publication but as a Christian reflection for Christian readers – quite possibly for Charles Malik alone. To the best of my knowledge, it survives only in Malik’s personal papers.

Issawi met the Harvard-trained Malik at AUB, where Malik had founded the philosophy department. In Beirut, the Greek Orthodox philosopher drew a circle of admiring faculty and students who regarded him as Lebanon’s greatest thinker, and Malik became Issawi’s mentor. In July 1945, Malik left the campus to pursue a decade of diplomatic service, becoming Lebanon’s first minister to the United States and its representative at the United Nations.

Malik’s influence ranged widely, but his fixed point was the preservation of Lebanon as a Christian stronghold. He later wrote: “Christianity enjoys genuine freedom in only one place in the Middle East: Lebanon, with freedom

⁴Issawi letter quoted in Sahar Hamouda and Colin Clement, eds., *Victoria College: A History Revealed* (Cairo and New York: The American University in Cairo Press, 2002), 88.

⁵Charles P. Issawi, *Egypt: An Economic and Social Analysis* (London: Oxford University Press, 1947); Issawi, *Growing Up Different*, 37.

⁶Interview in Gallagher, *Approaches*, 53.

comparable to Europe and America If free Christianity collapses in Lebanon – its last bastion in the East – it will vanish from the Middle East.”⁷ In that light, Issawi’s decision to send him a bleak meditation on Christian prospects was entirely natural. Malik would have understood the anxiety and shared it.

Issawi’s memorandum needs little gloss, but a few claims deserve emphasis:

- Under Islam, Christians survived not by right but by dispensation. Qur’anic forbearance spared them extermination, only to fix them in a permanent, inferior status within the *millet* order.
- The Muslim world is “chronologically in its fourteenth century” and “culturally in its 16th,” still awaiting a Reformation and Counter-Reformation, and thus unable to sustain liberal democracy or confessional equality.
- Imported toleration is a mirage. Europe achieved religious toleration after centuries of sectarian war; the Arabs have not passed through a comparable crucible and cannot simply “take over” the result.
- The political future is not secular nationalism but “Islamic fascism,” with movements like the Muslim Brotherhood as harbingers of a totalitarian order grounded in faith.⁸
- For Christians in Arab lands, the only effective remedy is emigration. Liberalism is naïve, foreign protection a trap, and a Christian “National Home” in Lebanon a mirage. For those who remain, Issawi counsels no illusions: anticipate a grisly and dreary reality.

This was a potent indictment and warning, but it remained a private one, confined to a drawer. At that time and place, the fate of Near Eastern Christians could not be discussed openly. For example, in 1947, Issawi’s friend Albert Hourani published an essay titled *Minorities in the Arab World*. “At that time,” Hourani remembered, “I was very much criticized by Arab nationalists who said, ‘You ought not to be writing about this, you are dividing the people. This is a time when you ought to talk about unity, not about division.’ The general feeling was that I ought not to have written it.”⁹ The criticism left its mark: Hourani distanced himself from the book, discouraged students from reading it, and resisted proposals to bring it back into print.

That Issawi was also subtly influenced by this pressure is clear in his reference to “Christian Arabs.” Before modern nationalism, Near Eastern Christians never saw themselves as Arabs. The idea that a Christian could be

⁷Charles Malik, “al-Kathir al-Matlub,” *al-Fuṣūl al-Lubnāniyah* 3 (Summer 1980): 24–34.

⁸Issawi may have been the first writer to use this term. For its more recent history, see the chapter on “Islamic Fascism” in Martin Kramer, *The War on Error* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2016), 71–76.

⁹See A. H. Hourani, *Minorities in the Arab World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1947); Hourani interview in Gallagher, *Approaches*, 26.

an Arab was created and spread by Christians eager to be accepted as equals by the Muslim Arab majority. It's not clear why Issawi mentions "Christian Arabs" in a memorandum arguing that such Christian efforts to gain acceptance under an Arab banner are futile. Perhaps by then, it had become a simple convention: Hourani, in his book on minorities, also treated "Arab Christians" as a category. Malik, however, famously asked: "Is a Christian Arab possible?" The title of Issawi's memorandum suggests yes, in theory; the content, no, in practice.

Taking his own advice

In line with his own memorandum, Issawi chose emigration. In 1947 he went to Washington to work at the Arab Office, to advocate against the partition of Palestine; early in 1948 he moved to New York and the UN's Department of Economic Affairs. Columbia recruited him to a tenured post in 1955; in 1975 he moved to Princeton's Near Eastern Studies department, retiring in 1986.¹⁰ He helped found the field of Middle Eastern economic history and distilled it in his *Economic History of the Middle East and North Africa* (1982).¹¹ "We decided to stay and, eventually, become American citizens," he later wrote. The offers to return to AUB he declined: in Beirut, "I am certain I could not have achieved half of what I did in the United States The stimulus and opportunities were just not there."¹²

From a distance, he watched his old world unravel. "After 1946," he noted of Egypt, "many foreigners and minority members, seeing the storm signals, left the country." The wars of 1948 and 1956 weakened Jews, British, and French; the nationalizations of 1961 "crippled the Egyptian bourgeoisie, finished off foreign interests and those of the Syrians and remaining Jews. Copts have also come under great pressure."¹³ Christian dominance in Lebanon, "peculiar" for lasting into the 1970s, could not escape the same fate. "The old order in Lebanon has passed beyond recall," he mourned in the mid-1980s.¹⁴ He outlived it, dying in 2000.

What follows consists of the transcribed typescript of the memorandum, with Issawi's handwritten emendations incorporated. My clarifying footnotes

¹⁰I recall Issawi's Princeton courses in 1976–77; they showed his range. In the fall, he offered "Themes in Contemporary Arab Thought." We read, in Arabic, al-Jabarti's account of the French in Egypt and Sadiq al-'Azm's post-1967 critique of the Arab condition. In the spring, he taught "Political Economy of Middle Eastern Oil," dense with technical detail and newly urgent after the 1973 oil shock. His arrival at the university – after his friend Bernard Lewis – helped establish Princeton's Department of Near Eastern Studies as the best in the country through the 1980s.

¹¹Charles Issawi, *An Economic History of the Middle East and North Africa* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982).

¹²Issawi, *Growing Up Different*, 43.

¹³Charles Issawi, *The Arab World's Legacy: Essays by Charles Issawi* (Princeton: Darwin Press, 1981), 207, 222.

¹⁴Issawi letter, *The New York Review*, January 15, 1987.

appear alongside his. The memorandum reveals another of his facets: in 1945, Issawi was prescient, if not prophetic.

ISSAWI, CHARLES

The problem of Christian Arabs with special reference to those of Syria and Lebanon

The first point to remember when examining the problem of Christians in Arab countries is that the very existence of this problem is due to the relatively great tolerance shown by Islam. In Spain and Sicily, countries occupied for many centuries by Moslems and once leading centers of Moslem culture, no Moslem problem exists because the victorious Christians "liquidated" the Moslems by varied but equally efficient methods. In Syria, Iraq and Egypt, on the other hand, whatever sporadic persecutions the Christians may have had to endure, no systematic liquidation could be attempted in view of the formal injunctions of tolerance of Christians and Jews to be found in the Koran. The importance of this was shown at the beginning of the sixteenth century; when the Ottoman Sultan Selim the Grim, wishing to tidy out the mosaic of nationalities and religions in his Empire, proposed forcibly to convert all Christians and Jews to Islam, his attempt was successfully opposed by the Grand Mufti.¹⁵

Islam went even further than mere toleration. By organizing the different communities on a religious basis (the so-called Millet system) and under religious leaders (Rabbi, Patriarch, Catholicos) it unwittingly preserved the framework of the Balkan nationalities, which were one day to revolt from the Ottoman Empire, and wedded the Christian Arabs to clericalism and clerical leadership.

But if in a certain direction Medieval Islam proved less exacting than the Modern Lay State, in all other respects its tolerance was much more limited. At a time when the only conceivable foundation of the state was religion, and when, consequently, in the whole area of Mediterranean civilization, membership of the Church was an essential prerequisite for membership of the State, Islam could not possibly admit non-Moslems to full partnership in the state, any more than Medieval Christianity could admit Jews. Like Jews in Europe, Christians in the Arab and Ottoman Empires were in but not of the State, at best a tolerated but despised minority living on the fringe of society. From the first days of the Moslem conquest they were excluded from certain occupations such as the Army and Judiciary. Later, as the Moslems became more civilized, they squeezed them out of the clerical and administrative posts they so largely filled. Gradually they lost what lands they had retained at the

¹⁵[Editor's note: Modern scholarship views this as an embellished story rooted in Istanbul church-property disputes rather than a documented program of mass forced conversion.]

conquest. The guild system often excluded them from certain crafts. Finally they were confined to commerce and finance, like the Jews in Europe.

Nor was this all. Again like Jews in Europe, Christians were subjected to special regulations concerning dress; they were forbidden to mount horses; they had to give the right of way to any Moslem they might cross in the street; their lives, honor, and properties were never secure from individual covetousness or mob fury. Everything was done to encourage conversion from Christianity to Islam, while the reverse process was punishable by death.

Little wonder that, in these circumstances, the mass of Christians outside the Lebanese mountains should have gone over to Islam. What is surprising is the tenacity which kept so many faithful to their religion, whether out of genuine conviction or merely because of that kind of pride which prevents a man from deserting a persecuted group – a sentiment which accounts for the continued attachment of many to Judaism.

Persecuted and despised, the Christians yet succeeded in adjusting themselves to the situation for two main reasons:¹⁶

- A. First, they accepted their political and social inferiority and did not even dream of equality;
- B. Secondly, they took over the culture of the Moslems (who had previously adopted many Byzantine and Persian ways of thought and living) as completely as was possible. Their language was Arabic; their music, food, dress, furniture, style of housing were those of the Moslems; their reading consisted mainly of the classics which the Moslems read. The only important difference between the two groups was the position of women (monogamous Christian and polygamous Moslem family), but even this was greatly attenuated by the complete seclusion of Christian women, who never went out of doors unveiled.¹⁷

The impact of Europe (1830+)

This balance began to be disturbed about a century ago. First came the very enlightened rule of Mohammad Ali, with his attempt to wipe out all distinctions between Christians and Moslems and his widespread employment of Christians in the highest posts (Hanna Bahri, Boghos

¹⁶[Issawi's note:] This statement holds good of the Christian Arabs of the plains and towns. In Lebanon, on the other hand, Christians always retained a degree of independence which allowed them to preserve their self-respect (and some feelings of superiority) and lessened their degree of Arabization. Thus Syriac was spoken in Kesrouan 300 years ago and certain Byzantine or European traditions survived.

¹⁷[Issawi's note:] Manners are a great uniting factor – but also a great dividing one. The fact that intermarriage between Moslems and Christians is not possible does more than anything to keep them apart. And Christian-Moslem hostility never runs so high as when women are involved, e.g. in cases of assault on women of one sect by persons belonging to another.

Bey, etc.)¹⁸ Then the Gulhané decree of 1839, with the accompanying declaration of the Grand Vizier “Moslems, Christians, Jews, you are all the subjects of the same father. The Sultan holds the balance even between you.” Then the Hatti Humayoon of 1856 and the Constitution of 1876, which gave all Ottoman subjects the same political rights, irrespective of religion. After 1840, too, the European Powers began increasingly to interfere in Arab affairs. More important, perhaps, was the founding of European schools and the infiltration of European culture which completely upset the previously existing balance.

A. For on the one hand the Christians took much more readily to European culture than did the Moslems.¹⁹ This had a two fold effect:

First, it meant that in their quest for westernised persons capable of running the renovated machinery of Government and business the rulers of Egypt and Syria were to turn increasingly towards the Christians. This resulted in Christians soon occupying a number of administrative posts disproportionate to their numerical ratio to the Moslems. The process was accentuated by the Ottoman Government’s desire to placate France after the massacres of 1860.

Secondly, it meant that Christians took over European ways of dressing, eating, etc. much more quickly than Moslems. Most important, perhaps, in this connection, their women began to move about unveiled, danced with men in public, etc. In other words *a wide cultural gap began to open between the two sects*, a gap still further widened by the predilection of Christians for European languages, particularly French, often to the detriment of their own.

B. On the other hand, the Christians drank deep of the intoxicating wine of European nineteenth century liberalism. There they found that all men are free and equal, that religious toleration is the criterion of civilization, that religion is the least important of the factors making for common citizenship. Naturally, they took over those teachings and were no longer content with their former condition but began to demand equality as *a natural right*.

Arab nationalism and the Christians

A striking trait of most of the leaders and thinkers of Arab nationalism is their desire to do away with religious conflicts and their insistence on the

¹⁸[Editor’s note: Hanna Bahri, a Greek Catholic, administered Egyptian-occupied Syria in the 1840s; Boghos Bey Yusufian, an Armenian, served Muhammad Ali Pasha as chief dragoman and Minister of Commerce and Foreign Affairs.].

¹⁹[Issawi’s note:] Further confirmation – if any were needed – of the fundamentally Christian character of European civilization.

unimportance of religious differences in view of the common national ties binding together all Arabs.

That Christians should attempt to ignore religious differences is natural. Their stress on nationality may be explained by their consciousness of the ties of language, culture, tradition which, in spite of everything, bind them to their country; by their love for their native soil; finally by the resentment provoked by Europeans who refuse to accept them as equals. Many of them have also become aware that European friendship for them is not disinterested.

The motives of the Moslems are more complex. There is a historical factor – the fact that Arab nationalism was directed against another Moslem people, the Turks, and was helped both intellectually and materially by Christian powers; there is the feeling that religious discrimination is out of date; there is the genuine desire among many educated persons, especially young men and women, to forget the dark, ugly past and start a new national life on a new basis; there is the increasing mixing up of Moslems and Christians in schools, business, Trade Union, parties, etc. which breaks down many old prejudices; there is finally the realization that unless the Christian problem is solved it will always provide a handy pretext for foreign imperialism to intervene.

Both Moslem and Christian youth looks confidently forward to the day, in the very near future, when differences between them will count no more than do those between Protestants and Catholics in England and America. “Such differences” they say “have no meaning in the twentieth century.” This view however seems based on a threefold error:

- A. *The Islamic world is not in the twentieth century.* Chronologically it is in its fourteenth century; culturally it is probably in its 16th – the age of the Renaissance, with its intoxicating discovery of a new civilization; socially and economically it is probably in its 17th or 18th – the dawn of capitalism and the very beginnings of the break up of feudal society. If this reading be accepted as correct it will be seen that the Arabs are not yet in a position to take over the institutions of twentieth century Europe. True, modern technology has greatly accelerated the rate of change and shortened the time necessary for adaptation, but it would be naive to imagine that a process which in Europe took four or five centuries can be consummated by the Arabs in as many decades. More specifically, it seems to me that Islam will react to its Renaissance by some equivalent of the Reformation and Counter Reformation – i.e. a purification and deepening of the faith accompanied by the discarding of dead dogmas and senseless superstition. The signs of such a religious revival can be traced in Mohammad Abdou and the Modernist school of Egypt. Prediction is always dangerous, but it does not seem to me as though religious feeling is dying in this part of the world.

B. *Religious toleration is not a piece of machinery* that can be shipped from one culture and set up again in another. Toleration of contrary opinions does not come “naturally” or spontaneously to men and the record of history contains few examples of toleration to set off against the mass of persecution.

In Europe, toleration only came when every other solution had been tried and failed: the extermination of minorities and the restoration of medieval Catholic Unity; and the coexistence of different states, some Protestant, others Catholic, in each of which uniformity was enforced. Both these solutions failed, owing to the intermixture of sects and their roughly equal power, which prevented the swift triumph of either side and condemned Europe to a century of devastating wars.

An attempt was then made to place Dissidence in the category of “permitted vice,” subjecting non-conformists to such penalties as fines, exclusion from offices and professions, etc. It was only in the 18th and 19th centuries that increasing Bourgeois prosperity and liberalism on the one hand,²⁰ and growing skepticism on the other, combined to sweep away the last traces of official discrimination. True there remains much popular prejudice, but this does not have important social repercussions, as most of the popular hatred has been diverted to national and social issues.

This brief account shows that Europe wrought the concept of toleration not by abstract thinking but with blood and tears. Is it likely that the Arabs will just take over this concept and apply it, without any of the causes that compelled Europeans to do so? If so they will have shown a capacity to learn from the experience of others which is absolutely unique in history.

There is little doubt that some Moslem and Christian leaders sincerely desire to obliterate their differences. There is still less doubt that the mass of both communities is far from having such desires. The ease and speed with which Moslem mass movements take an anti-Christian turn should be a sufficient index of the state of mind of the masses. The 1840–60 disturbances had, at first, a purely political significance; they were a struggle for predominance between the Druses and Maronites, with England backing the former and France the latter, and Turkey egging both on to mutual destruction. By the time they reached Damascus, however, they had degenerated into an unprovoked and indiscriminate massacre of Christians. The 1920 and 1925 Nationalist movements took, in some regions, a clear antichristian tone and massacres were only averted because certain Christian villages turned back their assailants by a heroic fight. In 1920, a few ugly accidents occurred in Egypt. Finally the recent demonstration in Egypt (2nd Nov. 1945), begun as an anti-Zionist

²⁰[Issawi's note:] Needed by expanding capitalism.

protest, culminated in an assault on churches and priests and other Christians, both native and foreign.²¹

The Christian masses are hardly less fanatical, and it is perhaps lack of means, not of intentions, which prevents them from repaying the Moslems in kind.

C. *We are not living in the rosy, expanding, nineteenth century but in the grim, neurotic 20th.* Europe has passed out of its brief liberal interlude²² and is reverting to a more congenial totalitarianism. What the nineteenth century liberals took for the normal order of things – Laissez Faire, parliamentary democracy, individualism and the safeguarding of minority rights – we now see to have been a passing phase provoked by very special conditions which are unlikely ever to recur. The normal state of mankind is totalitarian planning. Conditions in the Arab world are particularly favorable to totalitarianism. There is the unparalleled number of sects, with their disintegrating conflicts; the absence of internal cohesion, such as that which allows Britain to retain a large dose of liberalism without jeopardizing its national unity; the terrible urgency of the social and economic problems which cannot be solved by Laissez Faire but only by vigorous government action; the pressing dangers of foreign imperialism; finally the absence of any tradition of individual rights or group liberties. It is no accident that *every single* Arab youth movement professes some form of totalitarian philosophy, the defense of Liberalism being confined to the professional politicians, for whom Liberalism means the lining of their pockets, and to a few, stray, academic, intellectuals.

Unless external factors intervene, this totalitarian tendency will take the form of Fascism, not Bolshevism. Now Fascism, like every other political creed, adapts itself to the peculiar conditions of the country in which it settled. In Italy, with its strong Latin tradition, the integrating principle was the Absolutist State; in Germany the superior Nordic Race; in Austria, and still more in Spain, fascism took on a Clerical, Catholic, color. The Arab countries, too, will devise their own form of Fascism: Islamic Fascism.

²¹[Editor's note: On November 2-3, 1945, student rallies marking the Balfour Declaration in Cairo and Alexandria turned into anti-Jewish pogroms, spurred by Muslim Brotherhood and Young Egypt networks. Dozens of synagogues, schools, and businesses were wrecked or burned; hundreds were injured; several were killed. Though Jews were the principal targets, the violence spread outward: in Cairo, the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate – the community's seat – was damaged, several Catholic churches were attacked, and a Coptic school was vandalized. No Christian deaths were recorded, but Copts and other Christians took the point: anti-Jewish violence could engulf them too.]

²²[Issawi's note:] An interlude made possible only by the great cohesion inherited from the Middle Ages; this cohesion served as the framework onto which diversity could safely be fitted. The exhaustion of the resources of Medieval cohesiveness has necessitated the creation of a new form, which totalitarianism is attempting to do.

This is not a mere speculative guess, but an inference from the basic structure and trends of Arab society.²³ As for the structure, it is evident that the Islamic feeling is still very much stronger than the Arab nationalist feeling. In Egypt, for instance, people think of themselves primarily as Moslems, sometimes as Egyptians, only very rarely as Arabs. In Lebanon the main issue is between *Christian Lebanese* nationalism and *Moslem Arab* nationalism. And to suggest that the inhabitants of Arabia can discriminate between Islamism and Arabism is rather absurd.²⁴

As for the trends, an attempt to integrate Arab society and fight European cultural and political Imperialism on an Islamic basis can be traced from the time of the Wahhabis, the Sudanese Mahdists and the Libyan Senussis. These movements were crushed (though Wahhabism has revived and seems quite flourishing) but their place has been taken by the much more sophisticated and dangerous Ikhwan el Muslimeen in Egypt and the somewhat less interesting Shabab Mohammad (Hitler Jugend!) in Syria. I can speak with assurance only about Egypt, but already three years ago I risked *in print* the prophecy that the Ikhwan el Muslimeen, representing an Islamic Fascism, was the "coming" movement, and subsequent events have only confirmed this.²⁵

But why shouldn't the Arabs follow the example of the Kemalist Turks and adopt some form of lay, nationalist, totalitarianism? Merely because conditions in the Arab countries are very different from those in Turkey. And first what exactly did Mustafa Kemal achieve? Apart from such excellent reforms as the emancipation of women and the encouragement of industries, (and some rather silly ones such as the substitution of the hat for the fez) his outstanding achievement has been to make his people think and talk of themselves as Turks where formerly they had thought and talked of themselves as Moslems. But, even if we ignore the reaction which followed his death and took such cruel forms in the discriminatory taxation and deportation of Armenians and Jews in 1940-1,²⁶ it will be seen that conditions made such a change very easy in Turkey because the words Turk and Moslem were coterminous. In other words, there were no *non-Moslem Turks*, but only Christian Greeks or Armenians, speaking different languages and belonging to different cultures.

²³[Issawi's note:] Ibn Khaldoun, the greatest Arab political thinker, may be quoted in support: "In general, the Arabs are incapable of founding an empire unless they have created a structure of religion of a certain strength from some prophet or saint."

²⁴[Issawi's note:] In Palestine, the urgency of the Zionist danger has brought about Moslem-Christian rapprochement. Similarly in Lebanon the two communities seem to have reached a compromise owing partly to the desire to get rid of French rule. How long these two united fronts can last remains to be seen.

²⁵[Editor's note: I am unable to identify this source.]

²⁶[Editor's note: The dates given by Issawi are inaccurate. In wartime Turkey, two sequential measures hit non-Muslims. First, the "Twenty Classes" conscription: beginning in April - May 1941 and ending with demobilization orders on July 27, 1942 (final releases by early autumn), non-Muslim males - including the elderly and unfit - were drafted into unarmed labor battalions, disrupting businesses and forcing distress sales. Second, the Wealth Tax (*Varlık Vergisi*): adopted on November 11, 1942; from January 1943, defaulters were shipped to the Aşkale/Erzurum camps; the tax was abolished on March 15, 1944. The combined effect accelerated the collapse of many non-Muslim enterprises.]

Once the Greeks had been expelled, and the Armenians massacred, once the Moslem Turks were the sole occupants of their house, there was no reason why they should not affirm their *Turkish* individuality, at the expense of those Islamic links which bound them to their despised and backward Arab neighbors who had so recently stabbed them in the back.

The point to notice is that Kemal *made no attempt to solve the minorities problem on a lay, nationalist basis*. He first got rid of his minorities and then somewhat Europeanized his country. Turkey, therefore, whatever lessons it may hold in store for the Arabs, gives no ray of hope to Arab Christians.

What to do?

And first, in answering this question, we must rid ourselves of the sentimental belief that every problem admits of a solution. Of course, on paper, a solution can always be found, but not necessarily one which can be carried out or which will satisfy both parties to the dispute:

A/The Liberal solution must be rejected. Ideally it is the most satisfactory but in view of the state of mind of the masses it cannot succeed *here, today*. The result of twenty five years of patient labor are undone by a single street riot, such as those of Cairo and Alexandria, which at once reawakens in the most liberal Christians the fear of persecution and the sense of injury. And when one reflects that these riots may well have been the work of foreign agents provocateurs, and that they started with totally different objectives, one's pessimism reaches a climax. Clearly, whatever else they may expect, Christians must not look forward to a honey-moon period of liberalism and toleration.

B/The Protection of a Foreign Power. This is the great temptation to which Christians are subjected and which they must resist at all costs. Their culture and religion often enable them to establish with foreigners more points of contact than they can find with Arab Moslems; *the foreigner treats them as equals, or almost*; the foreigner will not massacre them or desecrate their churches; nay he gives them preferential treatment in appointment to jobs. Why then not accept his proffered protection? Yesterday it was France, tomorrow it may be Russia or America – or even Britain, whose right hand often does not know what its left hand is doing.

First, because less than 2 1/2 million Arab Christians have no right to act as an Imperialist Fifth Column and hold up the advance of 30 million Moslem Arabs. This would be an unpardonable treachery. *Secondly*, because nothing is more dangerous than the protection of a foreign power, which may at any moment change its policy and leave its protégés in the lurch. The Armenian massacres are a sufficient warning. "How long" asks Eliot Grinnell Mears "will it take minorities or weak countries to understand that in practical politics outside assistance is a mere gamble? Yet if ever a people thought that they were

well supported from abroad the Armenians were justly entitled to this opinion."²⁷

But the Arabs don't need to look as far as Armenia, for the events of 1840–60 show only too clearly the results of foreign "protection." Yet, when all is said, as long as the present state of things continues so long will some Christians inevitably look toward the foreigner for protection.

C/Mass Emigration. This is a possible solution. Christians in Northern and Southern America could at last shake off the nightmare of oppression, give themselves wholeheartedly to that European culture to which they take so readily, and rest assured that no one will ever persecute their children. The Moslems on their part will be rid of their thorniest problem.

It may be objected that Christian Arabs have a mission to their Moslem brothers and may not, therefore, desert their post. This argument must carry much weight with those who really believe in the truth of Christianity and in the necessity of spreading the Gospel. Their duty is plainly to keep the flag of Christianity where it has flown for two thousand years, whatever martyrdom this course may entail. But to those – the greater number – who are only nominal Christians, this argument is meaningless.

Another, lay version, of this argument says that Christians, being more educated, on average, than Moslems and having more natural aptitudes for understanding Western culture, should remain to guide the others. This argument, however, contains several flaws:

First, it is not certain that Christians are so much more cultured and apt as they like to believe;

Secondly, it is quite likely that Moslems will get westernized more quickly once they feel sure and confident of themselves. The Turks are taking readily to westernization because they no longer have a sense of inferiority and fear of imperialism. Why should not the Arab Moslems do the same.

Thirdly, even granting that Christians can help culturally it remains to be seen whether, voluntarily or involuntarily, their presence does not entail so much political harm as more than to offset their services. And, as we have said, whether they wish or not, they are always in danger of looking to the foreigner for help.

The real difficulty of this solution is sentimental. Most Arab Christians feel deeply attached to their soil and will not leave it unless conditions become absolutely unendurable. And, of course, it remains to be seen whether room could be found in the wide world for one million refugees.

²⁷[Editor's note: The quote is from Eliot Grinnell Mears, *Modern Turkey: A Politico-economic Interpretation, 1908–1923 Inclusive, with Selected Chapters by Representative Authorities* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1924), 524. Mears (1889–1946) was a Stanford University professor of geography and international trade, and a former U.S. Department of Commerce trade commissioner in the Near East.]

D/A Christian Lebanon. To many the best solution seems to be to create a Christian National Home in Lebanon, to which any Christian Arabs can flee in case of need.

The trouble with this solution is that, unless the trend of birth rates changes drastically, Lebanon will in a very few years have a Moslem majority. The only way to avoid this would be by a transfer of Moslem Lebanese into the interior and Christian Syrians into Lebanon, and such a course has often been suggested. But two grave objections may be urged:

First, it would aggravate the bad feelings between Christians and Moslems, The Moslem Lebanese would feel that they had been unjustly expelled from their homes and would do what they could to return to them.

Secondly, the solution would only be temporary. Even supposing the whole million Christian Arabs concentrated in Lebanon, how long would they be able to hold out against the fifteen million Moslems surrounding them (this figure includes neither Egypt nor Turkey)? They would probably lean on a foreign state and the whole game would begin again.

E/To Those who remain

Most Christian Arabs will probably remain. To them one word of advice should be given. "Do not imagine that you are living in the 20th – or rather 19th – century. Do not feel aggrieved if you are not treated as equals, if you are not given your fair share of appointments, if a certain discrimination is exercised against you. You dreamt a fine dream of Liberalism and Equality, but now you must awaken into a grizzly [sic] and dreary world of reality. Console yourselves – if you can – by reflecting that the greater part of mankind is in a similar plight."

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